

## **AERA Panel Paper – Hillary Salmons**

### **The Challenge**

Although measuring outcomes for youth in after school programs is as old as the programs themselves, measuring quality and impacts across city-wide OST systems is a new concept with which the OST world is just beginning to grapple. There are many reasons why system level evaluations are scarce, one of which is the relatively new (in the last 10 years) systems-building movement. With major funders like the Wallace and Mott Foundations and Atlantic Philanthropies supporting systems building work, many cities are starting to create new models for OST. At the same time, those funders are beginning to ask if their investments are worthwhile. They want to know that the systems are stronger than the sum of their parts and are asking for evaluations that look at the quality of programs and the impact they are having on the youth they serve.

The other main reason that system level evaluations are limited is because they are so challenging to conduct. Systems comprise a variety of different stakeholders (schools, community based providers, city departments, public entities), each with their own priorities, service populations of varying ages, funding sources, data collection and assessment systems, and intended outcomes. Finding ways to collectively assess and evaluate these various constituents is difficult.

#### *Different priorities and definitions*

Each stakeholder group may have different priorities for what they want to achieve for youth. For example, while the schools might be looking for academic achievement gains for participants in OST programs, the police department wants to see reductions in juvenile crime, and the dance instructor hopes students will deepen their content knowledge and skills. Likewise, each group may have different ways of defining key assessment components such as slots, participation, and skills attainment. These factors make it difficult to find cross-system outcomes and assessment measures on which everyone can agree.

#### *Different age groups*

OST systems are comprised of programs that serve children and youth across a variety of age groups, from elementary through high school. Developmental needs change as children age and high quality programs often shift their model (i.e., core outcomes, recruitment and retention strategies, curriculum and activities) to respond to these changing needs. For example, the goal of improving school attendance might be less relevant for programs serving elementary-aged children compared to older youth, taking differences of autonomy into account. Similarly, high school programs may have a more explicit focus on promoting high school completion and preventing dropouts than programs serving elementary or even middle school age youth. Designing common outcomes across an OST system is difficult because appropriate outcomes vary depending on the age of the participants served.

#### *Different tools*

Another complicating factor in creating system-level evaluations is that each of these different stakeholder groups has their own data collection and assessment systems. Some of the less

sophisticated providers might track participation by hand or in a crude Access database, while the school department has complex systems for tracking student contact information, grades, attendance, and test scores. In many cases, funders have required their grantees to use a variety of different assessment tools and data collection systems that might not be compatible with the system level tools an intermediary is promoting. For example, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America have an assessment tool and recommended data tracking tool that they ask all clubs to use. These clubs at the local level may not be willing to try a second tool that is proposed by the system developer or intermediary.

### *Different Capacities*

Perhaps the most compelling challenge systems face in assessing outcomes and measuring quality is the different capacities each partnering organization brings to the table. Some providers are well established, have several administrative staff, and are aware of and thinking about their own quality assessment and outcomes measurement. Others are made up of only one or two individuals who serve as both administrators and instructors. These providers are typically less savvy about assessment. Often they are independent artists or athletes with a skill to share but little youth development or program management experience. These organizations may not have the capacity in terms of skills, resources, or staff time to implement a data management system or engage in a complex quality improvement assessment process.

### **Providence After School Alliance Responds to the Challenge of Evaluating Systems**

Since its creation in 2004, the Providence After School Alliance (PASA), an initiative of Mayor David N. Cicilline, has built a network of public and private community partners, after school providers, city departments and neighborhoods to work together to increase and expand quality after school programming, strengthen the capacity of after school providers, and leverage resources to create better programs for the City's youth.

PASA's mission is to expand and improve after-school opportunities for the youth of Providence by organizing a system of after-school supports. This system will ensure access for all Providence youth to high quality after-school programs and learning opportunities. Guided by a business plan developed by Mayor Cicilline with over 100 after school partners, PASA focuses on quality improvement and capacity building, the development of coordinated programming for middle school youth through AfterZones and increasing access to quality recreation and sports programming.

PASA's systems building effort has started by focusing on the interests and needs of middle school age youth for whom the community has designed "neighborhood campuses" called AfterZones. An AfterZone operates as a community "campus" that provides a variety of programs for middle school youth such as art, dancing, football, cooking, filmmaking, tennis and maritime exploration. An AfterZone is a network of providers in one neighborhood who are committed to working together to provide quality opportunities for middle school youth.

To improve the quality of programs, PASA coordinates professional development opportunities, offers grants for model initiatives and provides expertise about best practices for the after school community. PASA works closely with Mayor David N. Cicilline, and the City's school, police and recreation departments, as well as the many inspired non-profit after school providers to

coordinate after school infrastructure and programming and to develop long-term policies that will sustain quality programming.

In order to respond to the challenges of evaluating a system of OST supports, PASA has engaged in a two-year community process to develop consensus around a definition of quality and a menu of supports to track and measure that quality. Two components of PASA's quality improvement strategy are relevant to this paper: the adoption of a citywide data tracking and management system and the development of quality standards and an accompanying program quality assessment tool. Each of these activities is described in greater detail below.

### **Developing Standards and a Program Quality Assessment Tool**

In 2005, PASA brought together a representative group of 25 after school providers, policy makers, and youth advocates, the Quality Improvement Work Group, to develop a set of standards and indicators that would help define quality after school programming.

PASA scanned the country for existing after school standards and indicators and information about how well they had worked. The scan included standards from Washington D.C., Kansas City, Chicago, and Baltimore, along with those produced by the National After School Alliance (formerly NSACA), as a starting point for Providence. PASA specifically looked for standards where youth development principles and practices were imbedded. It was critical that the standards were relevant to providers serving older youth. The work group then customized the standards and indicators to fit the needs and context of Providence. As the standards and indicators emerged, they were brought to providers, parents, youth leaders, after school funders and national after school researchers for feedback and approval. This community process helped PASA to combat the challenge of different priorities and definitions. Everyone was able to bring their needs to the table and contribute them to the final product.

Although the standards and indicators were distributed to the community through brochures, posters and workshops, it was clear from the outset that standards alone cannot change the quality of programs or the skills of program staff and volunteers. In fact, standards, when not matched with an assessment process, can be quite overwhelming and difficult to implement. It is with that in mind that PASA partnered with the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation to develop a program quality assessment tool based on their reliable and valid Youth Program Quality Assessment Tool (YPQA).

The Quality Improvement Work Group, providers, parents, and funders all agreed that an "off the shelf" assessment tool would not work for Rhode Island. We had invested too much of a community process in developing standards and indicators to throw them away in favor of a pre-packaged tool. Neither did stakeholders feel that a completely "home-grown" tool would have the credibility, reliability, or validity necessary to feel confident in the assessment process. The workgroup reviewed several tools, including those in use by providers in Rhode Island. It became clear through this review process that providers were not happy with existing tools. None met the full range of topics covered in the new standards and many were cumbersome or not useful. Instead of adopting one of these imperfect existing tools or developing our own, we used a hybrid approach that combines the nationally recognized and validated tool developed by High/Scope (the YPQA) with a supplementary component that addresses the unique needs and priorities of Rhode Island after school providers. The result is the Rhode Island Program Quality

Assessment Tool (RIPQA) that is being used statewide by OST providers to assess program quality.

In order to look at quality across the AfterZone systems at the city level in Providence, PASA is using the RIPQA to observe programs throughout the school year. In order to promote the collective definition of quality and engage providers in the quality improvement process, AfterZone staff as well as providers have been trained in how to use the tool to observe and assess programs. Observation teams are made up of an AfterZone staff member, a staff member from the provider organization, and a trained Quality Advisor who can provide an objective and expert perspective. These advisors then work one on one with providers to develop quality improvement plans based on the results of the observations. By engaging the providers in this observation and reflection process, and by providing a quality advisor, training, and support for the process, it becomes less taxing and more useful for providers with limited capacity. With this collective approach to quality improvement, PASA has met with little resistance. In addition, PASA has begun to work with state agencies, local funders, and advocacy organizations to eliminate duplication. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century program is now requiring all of its sites statewide to use the RIPQA instead of the tool they had been using. Local funders are seeking to promote the tool instead of others as well so that providers begin to see one consistent tool rather than being required to use several.

### **Data Tracking System**

Although tracking youth participation in out-of-school time programs is not a new idea, tracking enrollment, participation, and retention across an entire OST system is an innovative concept. PASA, in conjunction with Cityspan Technologies of Berkeley, California, has developed an OST reporting system that serves as a citywide data collection and management tool and helps us to track of our growing number of partners all serving this same set of clients.

PASA chose to work with Cityspan, developers of [youthservices.net](http://youthservices.net), to create an OST reporting system designed to allow multiple organizations to share information about one set of clients. [Youthservices.net](http://youthservices.net) has been used successfully in San Francisco and Washington, DC, and Cityspan helped PASA to adapt the system to meet the specific needs of our citywide network of providers. In Providence, 30 community organizations, recreation centers, and schools now have licenses to use the tool to access data on a central pool of AfterZone participants. By identifying an inexpensive (\$500/year), user friendly tool and providing training and free licenses for three years, PASA has been able to overcome some of the key challenges to effectively tracking data.

This [youthservices.net](http://youthservices.net) reporting system has proved valuable to PASA first and foremost because it serves as a data management tool. Not only are we able to centrally enroll participants at any of our partnering organizations, we are also able to keep track of attendance and dropout rates across the system on a day-to-day basis. Through an administrative reporting feature, PASA and the AfterZone leaders may quickly see the average daily attendance and overall enrollment percentages for all AfterZone partners. These reports enable partners to be accountable to one another for their successes (or failures) in reaching young people and to problem solve ways to fill vacant slots, reach out to recruit more youth, or find out why youth have stopped attending particular programs. PASA and its partners can also use the data to determine which programs

have been most successful and popular, in order to inform decisions about the types of programs to fund in the future.

The city's comprehensive use of the OST reporting system sends a reinforcing message to the public and private partners of PASA—that data and information about youth participation in quality programming matters to the leaders who care about the future well-being of youth in the city. A functioning city-wide data reporting system also supports PASA's long term goal of expanding OST services to all youth in the city, for we recognize that our ability to attract the public and private resources necessary to grow our system will depend on our ability to demonstrate broad impact on outcomes policymakers and funders value. As policymakers and funders often have different priorities for what they want to achieve for youth, the development of cross-system outcomes and assessment measures on which everyone can agree is an essential step in building a city-wide OST reporting system.

In addition to building the capacity and toolbox local providers possess to assess program quality and collect youth data, PASA is partnering with the Collaborative for Building After-School Systems (CBASS) to build consensus around common measures of after-school effectiveness that can be adopted across city-wide OST systems.

### **CBASS Measures of After-School Effectiveness**

CBASS was formed by six local, urban after-school intermediaries (Baltimore's After School Strategy, Boston After School & Beyond, Chicago's After School Matters, DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation, Providence After School Alliance, Inc. and The After-School Corporation in New York) with the goal of changing public policy to catalyze the development of after-school systems across the country.

CBASS partners recognize that one barrier to expanding access to after-school opportunities for youth in each of their home cities is the lack of a standard measurement tool that can capture the quality, productivity and success of programs across a system and be broadly adopted by a variety of stakeholders and providers. The need to develop such a tool is driven by two factors:

- In the absence of common measures, the after-school field risks being evaluated with measures used to test schools (i.e. standardized test scores), which fail to demonstrate the impact of after school on youth development and can cause policymakers and funders to undervalue its importance.
- While many public and private funders have supported the development of various program quality and youth development evaluation tools, they have not been widely adopted across city-wide systems in part because they may be too expensive to implement at scale.

To this end, CBASS partners are undertaking an initiative with Elizabeth Reisner of Policy Studies Associates, Inc., to identify a small number of broad, research-based measures that relate directly to the goals of after-school programs and are easy and cost efficient for local systems to adopt. The identification of relevant measures was guided by the following criteria:

- **Field tested in program and system evaluations**

- **Low burden; cost efficient**
- **Low levels of judgment needed (“low inference”)**
- **Applicable to a broad range of service approaches**
- **A focus on assets, rather than deficits**
- **An alternative to test scores**

The majority of research in the field focuses on evaluating after-school at a program level. Because of this focus, discussion about what to measure often takes place from the perspective of comprehensive evaluation design – how to capture the impact of a particular after-school program on individual participants across a wide variety of variables. Although this can be a valuable approach at the program level, OST systems builders often struggle with being similarly comprehensive.

Implementing comprehensive evaluations at a system-wide scale requires a huge commitment of resources, which are often impossible to secure faced with other pressing needs. As a result, most systems evaluations track impacts on cohorts or samples. While these evaluations are necessary and useful, they cannot demonstrate broad impact across the majority of participants in a system and are thus less effective in persuading policymakers of the necessity of after-school.

While many OST systems builders are making headway on developing the tools and capacities necessary to measure impacts across cities, the work of coming to common, base-line definitions of success across OST stakeholders remains. Agreeing on shared measures of after-school effectiveness is an imperfect task – it requires a narrowing down of potential measures to those that best bridge different priorities and are cost-effective enough to adopt across city-wide systems, leaving relevant measures aside. However, to attract the funding and public support needed to bring our field to scale we must persevere.

OST systems are often a patchwork of various governing agencies, funding streams and providers spread across a city. Common goals can help the fragmented elements of an OST system that exist in most cities coalesce into an integrated whole. What are the benefits of getting the mayor, the chief of police, the school superintendent, private funders and local providers to agree on common goals? More sustainable funding for OST, clearer accountability, greater linkages between institutions and a sense of common cause that all translates into better outcomes for youth.

As CBASS partners join forces to adopt and publicly report common measures of productivity and success across their cities, we hope to move the field towards meaningful systems level evaluations around a core set of measures. It is an essential step to improving the sustainability of our field and the positive impact of our systems.